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ABSTRACT

Some modern scholars of Zoroastrianism, a faith still practiced in Iran and India today, are convinced that the doctrines of post-exilic Judaism and Christianity concerning monotheism, righteousness, and the final judgment and resurrection have roots in this ancient religion. Beginning with Martin Haug, a 19th centurey German philologist, the prevailing theory has been that Zoroastrianism was rooted in a strict monotheism, an idea that evolved from his study of the Avesta (the Zoroastric sacred book) and the Gathas (the 17 hymns) as he erroneously claimed that the Hostile Spirit, representing evil, and the Holy Immortals, created by God to aid in his battles against evil on earth, were later added by followers to Zoroaster's teaching of monotheism. Haug's theory, unquestioningly accepted by later scholars, only adds to the confusion surrounding the actual tenets of the faith. Due to centuries of oppression of the Zoroastrians, known as the Zardushtis in Iran and the Parsis in India, the priests have only recently begun to cooperate with scholars, to produce their prayers and rituals in written form, and to publish other manuscripts that enable researchers to comprehend Zoroastrian dogma. Additionally, through the linguistic study of ancient Persian dialects, in which are written the Avesta, the Gathas, and the Pahlavi literature, the translations of Vedic and Pahlavi (Middle Persian) are revealing the true teachings of Zoroaster which are based on: (1) God as the supreme being; (2) the ardent pursuit of righteousness; and (3) a final judgment and resurrection. The document concludes with a 20-item bibliography. (DJC)

No. 6

Mary Boyce

# ZOROASTRIANISM: THE REDISCOVERY OF MISSING CHAPTERS IN MAN'S RELIGIOUS HISTORY

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Asian Studies Research Institute

TEACHING AIDS FOR THE STUDY OF INNER ASIA

No. 6

Mary Boyce

# ZOROASTRIANISM: THE REDISCOVERY OF MISSING CHAPTERS IN MAN'S RELIGIOUS HISTORY

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In his History of the World, Arnold Toynbee identified a great cultural area in the Near East as the 'Syriac civilization'; and of it he wrote: 'The Syriac civilization arrived at a particular conception of God which is common to Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam, but alien alike from the Egyptic, Sumeric, Indic or Hellenic veins of religious thought.' As well as sharing to a large extent their concept of God, these four faiths have a number of doctrines in common. Most of their adherents have subscribed, that is, to belief in heaven and hell, individual judgment at death, an appointed end of the world, the resurrection of the body, a universal last judgment and life everlasting. That Islam, the youngest of the group, owed a great debt to Judaism and Christianity has never been disputed; but what remains a matter for continuing debate is the question of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand, both nurtured, like Islam, among Semitic peoples, and Zoroastrianism on the other, the odd one out of the group, being an Iranian religion preached by a prophet who, like the Buddha, belonged to the Indo-European family of nations.

Now of the beliefs just outlined, none is attested in pre-exilic Judaism. They appear in writings of the post-exilic period, after the Jews had been subject for generations to the Persians, who were Zoroastrians. The deduction to be made from this fact, once it was apprehended, seemed so clear that the following conclusion was drawn already in the 19th century,

in a passage which has been cited in successive editions of Peake's Commentary on the Bible: 'The post-exilic period in Jewish history saw a grafting on to the ancient Hebrew culture of a new set of religious ideas and beliefs which had a new kind of literature, namely apocalyptic literature, as its chief vehicle of expression. The thoughts of men were turning towards a supernatural and extra-mundane salvation. The origins of this development are to be traced ultimately to Persian influence.'

With this and similar statements being made by Christian theologians, one might expect Zoroastrianism to be widely and seriously studied in the West, with much the same eagerness and curiosity which has been devoted to the Dead Sea Scrolls; but in fact this great religion remains largely unknown, and work on it has been left in the main to a handful of Orientalists, scattered thinly through the universities of the world. There are a number of reasons for this, and one is undoubtedly the instinctive, fundamental rejection of the thesis of Zoroastrian influence; for however strong the arguments might be for a massive contribution by that faith to the formation of Christian beliefs, all the instincts of those brought up in a Christian culture were to refute or ignore them. From their earliest days, Christians had learnt to think that there was only one people chosen by God to prepare the way for Christ, namely the Jews. The stream of divine revelation had always seemed to flow along one course, that of the Old Testament prophets; and the possibility of there being another source of religious inspiration, a great confluent

flowing out of Iran, was so startling, and such a threat to established ways of thought, that it was a natural reaction to dismiss it out of hand, or at the most to acknowledge it with the most cursory of references.

Another, academic, reason for the general neglect of Zoroastrianism by theologians was that, whereas the Dead Sea Scrolls, once published, were accessible to any serious scholar in the Judaeo-Christian field, Zoroastrianism has its original associations with what Toynbee called the 'Indic' civilization, and the study of its sacred books demands a wholly different academic training. It was reasonable, therefore, to leave this work to specialists, with the hope of being able to make use of their detailed findings. Unfortunately, however, just because Zoroastrianism forms a link between two great but entirely different civilizations, and because it has been eclipsed in its own proper sphere, Iran - the geographical bridge between India and the Near East - by Islam, there is no obvious place for its study in an academic curriculum; and so scholars in this field have always been few and far between. And, working often alone, and without the restraining influence of a sufficient body of informed and critical opinion, some have veered wildly to extremes of interpretation, leaving colleagues in neighbouring disciplines bewildered or skeptical. So in due course, a school of thought came into being among Christian theologians which sought to invert the theory of influence, and to maintain that in fact it was Judaeo-Christianity which had affected Zoroastrianism, and

not the other way about. In this paper it is intended to sketch briefly the main causes of the confusions that have beset Zoroastrian studies, and to indicate the extent of the solid knowledge which has by now been gained, which should make it possible to form a just estimate of its relationship with other world religions.

Zoroastrianism - the religion preached by the prophet Zarathushtra - is still a living faith, adhered to by the Zardushtis of Iran and the Parsis of India; and this, one might think, should have made it relatively easy to establish its main tenets and observances. But in fact, scholars met great obstacles here at first, created by the hardships and sufferings which these two communities had undergone. For many centuries - from the 6th century B.C. to the 7th century A.D. - theirs had been a great imperial faith, upheld by rulers who dominated much of the Near and Middle East. Then came the upsurge of the Arabs, who conquered Iran and gradually imposed Islam throughout the land. Mosques replaced fire-temples, Zoroastrian books were destroyed, and almost all traces of the old religion were in the end blotted out - so effectively that Zoroastrianism virtually disappeared from world history. Only a handful of believers held by their ancestral faith, despite proselytizing, social pressures and active persecution. Of them one small band left Iran by ship in the 9th century to seek religious freedom elsewhere. They were received by the tolerant Hindus of Gujarat, in western India, where they became known as

the Persians or 'Parsis' ('Persia' is in many usages a synonym for 'Iran'). There they lived in unobtrusive poverty for the succeeding centuries, practising their religion freely among the Hindus - although Moslem armies eventually reached Gujarat also, and the Parsis experienced something of what their co-religionists in Iran had to undergo. In Iran the Zardushtis gradually fell back on two strongholds, the oasis cities of Yazd and Kerman, both far from frontiers and royal courts, and shut in by deserts and mountains. Even there they formed a minority only, encapsulated by a mainly hostile Moslem society, and utterly unknown therefore to the outside world.

The name of Zoroaster (this being their rendering of Zarathushtra) had been handed down by the ancient Greeks as that of a great Eastern sage who belonged to remote antiquity; and a stirring of interest in his teachings began in 17th-century Europe, when an Oxford Orientalist, Thomas Hyde, tried to reconstruct what he could of them from a few Persian and Arabic sources. At about the same time, enterprising merchants began to make their way to Iran and India, where they encountered the Parsis and the 'Gaurs', as the Moslems contemptuously called the Zardushtis of Iran. (The word is thought to mean simply 'infidel'.) By that time, the little Iranian community had been reduced to such poverty that 'poor as a Gaur' was a local proverb for wretchedness. Nevertheless, several travellers recognized these still dignified,and notably honest, people as adherents of the ancient Zoroastrian faith, and questioned them eagerly about

their beliefs and customs - only to be met generally by a blank wall of seeming ignorance and stupidity. We know now that this was only assumed, for letters survive from this time, written by Irani priests to the Parsis, which show that both communities had then a clear faith, and were scrupulous in maintaining rites and observances; but centuries of persecution had taught them the value of silence as a defence against Moslem mockery and insults. And since the Europeans had their chief dealings, naturally, with Moslems, they met them with equal reserve. The same was true more or less of the Parsis; and the unhappy result of the travellers' reports was that Western scholars early formed the opinion that the living community had been so ground down by poverty and persecution that little useful could be learnt from them.

One merchant wrote, however, of seeing a great book in the hands of the 'Gaurs'; and in the mid-18th century an ardent young Frenchman, Anquetil du Perron, set off as an enlisted soldier of the East India Company (for he had no money for the voyage), determined to acquire such a book from the Parsis. In this he was brilliantly successful, for he not only managed to purchase a manuscript of the Avesta - the Zoroastrian Bible - but also, to the deep indignation of the rest of the community, persuaded an elderly Parsi priest, called Dārāb, to translate the whole work for him. Dārāb was no great scholar, and communication between him and Anquetil was inevitably imperfect, so that one must marvel at the fact that the French translation which

Anquetil eventually brought back with him, although rough, gave nevertheless a very fair idea of the general content of much of the Zoroastrian holy book. Anquetil also published with his translation detailed and invaluable notes on Parsi rituals and observances.

Orthodox Zoroastrian belief was that the whole of the Avesta was revealed by God to their prophet, and enshrined Zoroaster's own words; and it was thus, accordingly, that Anquetil presented his hard-won treasure to Europe, where many learned men were profoundly shocked by it. They had looked, in the light of Greek tradition, for words of noble wisdom and philosophical enlightenment, and found instead what seemed, in that first imperfect rendering, to be the scripture of a polytheistic, ritualistic faith, in which invocations of many gods appeared more prominent than any moral or spiritual aspirations. We know now that this is largely because the surviving Avesta is in fact a liturgical book. Three-quarters of the original work, it is estimated - including all the sections directly concerned with expounding doctrine and ethics - had been lost in the centuries following the Moslem conquest. Some 18th-century scholars, however, lacking this perspective, harshly dismisssd Anquetil's great discovery as spurious. Others, however, addressed themselves to the task of trying, with the key which he had given them, to reach a better understanding of the ancient text.

Indo-European comparative philology was just then in its infancy, and there was excitement at the realisation that there

were great similarities between the newly recovered Avestan language and that of the Rigveda, the oldest Indian religious work. Helped by this knowledge, and by the acquisition of more manuscripts from India, a Danish scholar, Westergaard, published the first edition of the Avesta in 1852; and a few years later a brilliant young German philologist, Martin Haug, made two radical discoveries: firstly, that the Avesta was a composite work, made up (like the Old Testament) of texts from various different epochs; and secondly, that embedded among the rest was a group of seventeen hymns in a much more archaic dialect, and that it was these hymns, and these alone, which could be regarded as the authentic utterance of Zoroaster himself.

It is now recognized that these seventeen hymns, called the Gathas, are among the most difficult compositions in the whole of world literature, and over a hundred years later scholars are still struggling for agreement in translating them. The difficulties arise partly because of their antiquity and their linguistic isolation (which means that they contain a high proportion of unknown words); and partly because in them Zoroaster's lofty thoughts and aspirations found expression in what was evidently even in his own day - probably well before 1000 B.C. - an ancient and highly stylised poetic form, subtle and allusive rather than expository. Unless one already has some knowledge from another source of his basic doctrines, his utterances here remain necessarily therefore largely enigmatic. Anquetil's preliminary translation, based on Dārāb's, certainly gave no real

help for their comprehension; and in the light of present knowledge, we can see that the Zoroastrians themselves had lost the understanding of the literal meaning of these exalted works relatively early - probably in the pre-Christian era. They venerated them, however, as mantras, that is, as sacred words which, if recited accurately and with faith, had power in themselves. This did not necessarily mean, however, that Zoroaster's followers had thereby lost all knowledge of the substance of their prophet's teachings, which, since he had meant them to reach all mankind, he must have often expounded, in the course of a long life, in plain words to ordinary people.

This, however, was the assumption which Haug made. He had been misled, like the rest of Europe, by the travellers' tales into thinking that the contemporary Zoroastrians were ignorant of their own religion; and he transposed this mistaken state of affairs into the remote past, and assumed that Zoroaster's earliest followers had almost instantly forgotten or corrupted their prophet's teachings. This, he thought, would explain the regrettable polytheism and ritualism apparent in the rest of the Avesta - the 'Younger Avesta', as scholars term it, because it is all linguistically later than the Gathas. So he supposed that he could justifiably ignore all post-Gathic texts as heretical and concentrate on the task of translating the Gathas simply by the light of his own intelligence, and his knowledge of Vedic.

Haug was eager, evidently, to use his discovery of the

authorship of the Gathas to vindicate Zoroaster in the eyes of 19th-century Europe as a teacher and prophet; and he managed to produce, in all sincerity, a new translation which did just that - which presented him as a strict monotheist, who addressed God with heartfelt prayers, but rejected all beliefs in other divine beings, and all rituals and sacrificial offerings.

It is easy now to see the various traps into which Haug fell in order to be able to reach these conclusions. The word deva is used in the Vedas as a general term for 'god'; but Zoroaster (for what reason it will probably never be known) applied the Avestan term daēva to a particular group of martial gods - beings held to delight in combat and strife - whose worship he denounced. Haug, relying on the Vedic usage, not unnaturally concluded that in denouncing these particular divinities, Zoroaster was rejecting all gods other than the supreme Lord. Then he interpreted another group of divine beings, the 'Holy Immortals,' whose names reverberate through the Gathas, and who are still the objects of veneration among Zoroastrians today, as being simply aspects or faculties of God; and so he was able to reconcile their existence with the theory of Zoroaster's strict monotheism. (This was possible because these great Beings hypostatize abstract qualities or states, as is the case with a number of divinities in the old Indo-Iranian religion.) Finally, there are many references in the Gathas to cruelty to cattle. It is now recognized that cattle-imagery in the Avesta has parallels with New Testament imagery of sheep and lambs, and that in both cases

the use of such imagery was fully compatible with ritual sacrifice, devoutly offered; but Haug interpreted Zoroaster's words to mean in each instance a passionate rejection of blood-sacrifice. He further explained one obscure verse, in which the use of an unnamed intoxicant is denounced, as being a ban on the preparation and offering of the haoma-plant, which down to today remains the central rite of Zoroastrian worship. There are many references in the Younger Avesta to sacrifice and to the haoma-offering, and so his interpretation of Zoroaster's words in these regards strengthened Haug's conviction that his followers had, almost from the moment of their prophet's death, betrayed and neglected his teachings. These teachings, Haug was therefore forced to conclude, had accordingly remained unheeded until rediscovered by him himself, seated at his 19th-century desk, and aided by the new tool of comparative philology.

When one looks back from the vantage-point of present knowledge, it may seem astonishing that a young scholar could thus set his own judgment, slenderly based on what was virtually a pioneer study of one small group of texts - and deeply enigmatic texts at that - against the whole later scripture of a once mighty faith. But Europe in the 19th century was very sure of itself, and ready to instruct the world; and Haug's interpretation found wide acceptance there - largely because it re-established Zoroaster as a prophet of whom the enlightened West could approve - more or less, that is, as a rational and ethical theist, who made minimal demands for observance.

Haug himself, however, was brought into contact with living Zoroastrianism through an invitation to teach Sanskrit in India. While he was there, he followed Anquetil in learning all that he could of Parsi customs and beliefs, but without, in his case, any thought that these could help to illumine Zoroaster's own teachings. What was positively harmful, moreover, for the development of Zoroastrian studies was that this dedicated scholar gave a series of lectures to Parsi audiences, in which he expounded his own interpretation of the Gathas with vigour and complete conviction. Most of his listeners were shocked by what seemed to them blasphemy - as shocked as many Christians were to be when first confronted with higher criticism of the Bible; but one group listened eagerly. This was made up of men who had been educated at British schools in Bombay, and who were already seeking means to reconcile the doctrines and practices of their ancient faith with the world of contemporary Western thought and science. Haug unexpectedly provided them with a startlingly simple solution, for according to him they could jettison almost all traditional beliefs and observances, and still account themselves faithful followers of Zoroaster. They speedily set on foot a 'reform' movement within their small community, and this meant that thereafter the Parsis were divided, and could not speak with a single voice in the continuing debate about the nature of their prophet's teachings. Moreover, since the reformers were mostly Western-educated, and wrote in English, it was their utterances, and not those of the orthodox, which reached Europe,

where they were innocently taken to be proof that Haug's interpretation of the Gathas must be correct, since it reflected the beliefs of Zoroastrians themselves. This has remained a source of continuing confusion.

Meantime, while Haug was in India, an English engineer, E.G. West, who worked on the Bombay railways, had discovered from the Parsis the existence of a secondary Zoroastrian literature in Pahlavi, and had begun to study and translate this with scientific enthusiasm and energy. With this Pahlavi literature, which is considerably more extensive than the surviving Avesta, Zoroastrianism enters the sphere of Toynbee's 'Syriac civilization'. Zoroaster himself lived and taught, probably in the middle of the second millennium B.C., in the far north-east of Iran; and from there his faith gradually spread over the whole land, including Persia proper, in the south-west. It was the religion of the first Persian Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great in 559 B.C.; of the succeeding Parthian Empire; and of the second Persian Empire, which succombed eventually to the Arabs. During all this stretch of time, down to about the mid-4th century A.D., the Zoroastrian priests maintained their holy works in oral transmission, holding them to be too sacred to be entrusted to the foreign invention of writing. The Gathas themselves were strictly memorised, and the Younger Avesta too took on a fixed form from relatively early times, in what had become a dead church language; but the secondary literature - translations of Avestan texts, glosses, commentaries and the like -

existed always in the contemporary vernaculars, and was reshaped by each generation for its own enlightenment. So by the chance of history this literature survives for us only in Middle Persian (also called Pahlavi) because this was spoken during the second Persian Empire, which was the last great Zoroastrian epoch. There is a gap of several hundred years, therefore, between this Pahlavi literature (from the south-west) and even the Younger Avestan texts, (from the north-east) with virtually no other theological material surviving between them.

West's admirable translations of Pahlavi works were used by one of the greatest of Zoroastrian scholars, a countryman of Anquetil's, James Darmesteter, who in his turn travelled to Bombay and sought to learn still more of Parsi observances, to illumine a new translation of the whole Avesta, which he published in the 1890's. West had shown that the Pahlavi literature included renderings of many missing parts of the Avesta, and so made it possible to form a much clearer idea of the Zoroastrian doctrinal and ethical system than could be gained from the liturgical texts alone; and from studying the Pahlavi books, Darmesteter came to the conclusion that, late though these were in their surviving form, the religion expounded in them was 'a faithful reflection, in its theology and ethics, of the ideas of the Gathas,' so that they provided in fact an invaluable key to the sublime complexities of the Gathas themselves. He further held that the Parsis, with their noble moral code, self-discipline, and abundant charity, were still living according to the precepts

of their prophet. Darmesteter, that is, was the first scholar to maintain, and try to show, that the Zoroastrian tradition is a unified one, and harmonious from beginning to end, from the teachings of Zoroaster down to the orthodoxy of the present day - although even he was influenced by Haug in one fundamental point, in that he accepted the theory that Zoroaster had preached a strict monotheism. This then obliged even him to postulate a measure of betrayal in the beliefs of his followers.

However, had Darmesteter been generally listened to, the course of Zoroastrian studies might have run more smoothly; but unfortunately by the time that he published his findings, several generations of scholars had imbibed Haug's theory of a complete break in early Zoroastrian tradition, and this had already hardened into academic dogma. Moreover, it required an unusual width of scholarship to follow in the Frenchman's footsteps, uniting as he did the study of Avestan and Pahlavi, with support from Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and Gujarati. Although the language of the Pahlavi texts is relatively simple, the script in which they are written is a difficult one, for it has too few characters, and is strewn with Aramaic ideograms. To study Pahlavi thoroughly one needs therefore some training in Semitic languages, whereas to work on the Gathas one must have a knowledge of Vedic. Following Haug rather than Darmesteter freed the Vedic scholar from the obligation to learn Pahlavi, and allowed the student of later Zoroastrianism largely to ignore the Gathas. This is not to suggest that any scholar ever

consciously adhered to Haug's theory because of this; but the fact that this is how Zoroastrian studies divide linguistically, has undoubtedly helped to keep that theory sturdily alive. And its relevance to the question of Zoroastrian influence is this: the characteristic doctrines common to Judaeo-Christianity and to Zoroastrianism are first fully set out in the Pahlavi books, which were not written down until the Christian era. So when Haug's interpretation gained currency, Western theologians could argue - and did - that chronological precedence was with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and so influence might reasonably be held to have flowed from that to Zoroastrianism, which (according to Haug's interpretation) was a religion virtually without doctrines.

One of the many difficulties for maintaining this theory was undoubtedly that raised by the matter of ethics. The more that was learnt of the Parsis, the more warmly everyone agreed that their lofty standard of morality was 'Gathic' - in accord, that is, with what was demanded of his followers by Zoroaster. But how to account for a community having betrayed their prophet's doctrines within a generation or two of his death, and yet having maintained his ethical teachings, unsupported by theology, through both prosperity and persecution, for some 3000 years? The theorisers lent heavily on the 'reformist' movement among the Parsis, and tried to establish some historical background for it to bridge the gap between it and the Gathas. It so happened that during their second empire the Persians put out heavy propaganda

to the effect that they were much more devout and orthodox Zoroastrians than their defeated rivals, the Parthians. So on this basis a theory was evolved that this was the time (from the 3rd to the 6th centuries A.D.) of Zoroastrian reform - that somehow (no one troubled to explain how) the Persians had then managed to return to the pure teachings of their prophet, that is, to rigid monotheism and minimal observance; and that it was this reformed faith which had survived under Islam, to declare itself through enlightened Parsis in the 19th century. It is a tribute to the power that academic dogma can exert that this absurd theory not only established itself but is still being repeated in print today, although in fact this period of putative 'reform' was the very time when the Pahlavi books were being written down, and their contents are full in accord with those of the Younger Avesta, in both theology and ritual injunctions.

One reason why this and other groundless theories have been readily propounded and have flourished in the field of Zoroastrian is undoubtedly that the arbitrary severance of the enigmatic Gathas from the intelligible later traditions of the faith set the door wide open for uncontrolled theorising about the nature of Zoroaster's teachings. And a contributory factor was that the small number of scholars specialising in pre-Islamic Iran were overwhelmed this century by a mass of newly discovered, non-Zoroastrian material. Most of this came from excavations along the old trade routes across Inner Asia, where archaeologists, searching for Turkish remains, were astonished to find manuscript-

fragments in no fewer than four previously unknown Middle Iranian languages, as well as many in Middle Persian, that is, in the actual language of the Pahlavi books, but written in a much clearer script, without ideograms. There was no Avestan, because these manuscripts came from the ruins of Manichaean, Buddhist and Nestorian Christian sites; and naturally the wealth of fresh material distracted attention from Zoroastrian studies. But in the long run the Inner Asian finds have proved an invaluable help for these, and especially for a clearer understanding of the Pahlavi books. Their discovery also stimulated work on living Iranian dialects, and new light was shed through all this on Avestan vocabulary and syntax. Meanwhile linguistic studies went on of the Vedas and the Gathas themselves, with continual progress towards a fuller literal understanding of Zoroaster's own words.

But while Iranian philologists were eagerly working on their newly-discovered treasure, the study of Zoroastrianism for its own sake was largely left either to generalists in the field of religion, or to scholars from neighbouring disciplines, who were attracted to some particular aspect of this faith. The most influential of the generalists undoubtedly has been Dumézil, who since 1924 has published almost 100 works bearing on the theme of a reconstructed Indo-European religion - a religion which, the French scholar maintained, was shaped by the three functions of sovereignty, aggressive force and productivity. The gods themselves, he held, were divided into three groups

according to these three functions; and Zoroastrianism was one of the religions which he pressed into service to prove this hypothesis. And since there is not a scrap of evidence in the lucid Younger Avesta to substantiate it, he turned to the Gathas for his source. Zoroaster, he maintained, had deliberately replaced the old Indo-European gods by the 'Holy Immortals' of his own revelation, whom he still assigned, however, to the three functions through an elaborate system of correspondences. Thereafter, Dumézil supposed, the prophet's followers - 'infidel Zoroastrians' he termed them - lost the key to this subtle system, and revived the worship of the old gods side by side with that of the Holy Immortals, and so obscured the tripartite scheme which had given their true significance to Zoroaster's teachings. These remained accordingly misunderstood until Dumézil made his own investigations of them some three millennia later. His approach, that is, was parallel to Haug's, but his conclusions were utterly different.

With ironic appropriateness, Dumézil's theory produced a threefold reaction among Iranists. Some politely ignored it. Some sought vigorously to refute it, and some accepted it wholeheartedly. The chief spokesman for the third group has been the Belgian scholar, Duchesne-Guillemin, by training an Iranian philologist. He has written extensively on Zoroastrianism, both for a specialized and a general readership, and so has made Dumézil's interpretation widely known. It is evident that this is a complex one, requiring elaborate exposition; and so, although

both Dumézil and Duchesne-Guillemin write with French clarity, the results of their works have considerably confused the general understanding of Zoroastrianism.

Meantime in the 1930's another distinguished scholar, H.S. Nyberg, a Semitist, developed an interest in Zoroastrianism through studying the ideograms in Pahlavi. He came to agree with Darmesteter about the unity of the Zoroastrian tradition, seeing it as flowing in an uninterrupted stream from the prophet down to recent times; and he produced a weighty book full of learning and valuable insights on this subject. But before he began working on Zoroastrianism, Nyberg had been deeply impressed by the shamanism of Inner Asia, and he became convinced that Zoroaster was a shaman, and that the Gathas were ecstatic utterances, spoken by him in trance. But he supposed that Zoroaster, originally a monotheist as well as a shaman, had himself later in life revised his early teachings on pragmatic grounds, by admitting the worship of a number of divinities whom Nyberg held to have been the supreme gods of various Iranian tribes. The Swedish scholar thus accepted after all the standard view that there had been a radical change in the tradition, but he held, idiosyncratically, that this change had been made by the prophet himself, in a post-Gathic period.

The ideas of Dumézil and Nyberg were blended and developed by the Swedish scholars Wikander and Widengren, who in their very different ways have both indulged in considerable flights of speculation and fantasy. Meantime the eminent archaeologist,

E. Herzfeld, wrote a two-volumed work which presented Zoroaster as an acute statesman at the court of King Darius, in the 5th century B.C.; while Hinz and Zaehner followed an earlier tradition in presenting Zoroastrianism as having indeed had great influence on Christianity. But they each in very different ways carried this to the point of treating Zoroastrianism as no more than an earlier form of Christianity, which had lost its own vitality and significance once it had handed over the torch to the younger faith. A great gulf yawned therefore between their interpretations and those of Dumézil, Nyberg and Herzfeld; while the Franco-Polish scholar, Molé, tried yet another approach by treating Zoroastrianism (in a very large book) entirely on phenomenological lines, and so divorced from any historical reality.

There have thus been offered a bewildering diversity of interpretations of Zoroastrianism within a few decades, with the different authors sometimes totally ignoring one another. And not one of these interpretations has any close or consistent bearing on the realities of Zoroastrian belief or practice. So it is tempting to adapt the words of the honoured teacher, W.B. Henning, and to say: 'It is comforting to think that they cannot all be right. It is even more comforting to think that perhaps none of them is so'.

This is not to suggest that something cannot be learned from each of these works on Zoroastrianism, if only it can be sifted out; but the fundamental weakness which all these twentieth-century studies share, in my opinion, is that their authors

have concentrated on texts, and have paid little or no heed to observance or living tradition. Even among those peoples whom Muhammad classed as being 'of the book', scripture has had to be interpreted through the continuing tradition; and the Zoroastrians were not a 'people of the book'. Indeed, before this was made grounds for persecution under Islam, they would undoubtedly have scorned such a title. For they respected, not a written but an oral tradition, and an inheritance of beliefs and practices transmitted by word of mouth and by example from generation to generation. Zoroastrianism in this respect resembles Christianity during its first fifteen hundred years of life, when the Bible existed only in manuscript and in learned tongues, safely locked away from the comprehension of ordinary men, more than it does Christianity today. Yet most scholars have treated the surviving Avestan texts as if they had the same importance in the religious lives of Zoroastrians as the printed Bible in the vernacular has had for Christians in modern times; and this mistaken emphasis, together with a large indifference to Zoroastrian devotional practice had led to what seems at times an almost complete distortion of the faith.

Fortunately, while Western scholars toiled over the text of the Avesta, or spun theories around its contents, the Parsis prospered, gained new confidence, and, casting off the reticence of centuries, published more and more Pahlavi texts from manuscripts in their possession, their priests also wrote detailed descriptions of their forms of prayer and worship, and actually

enacted their major rituals for serious inquirers. This has made it steadily more possible to apprehend Zoroastrianism as a coherent whole, rather than as a collection of textual and doctrinal problems. Because Zoroastrians keep strict purity laws, unbelievers are not ordinarily allowed to be present at their religious services, and so these remained for a long time largely unfamiliar to the West, where it was mistakenly thought that they were entirely a matter for priests, rather than for the community at large; and this encouraged scholars to dismiss them as 'mysterious' rites of only peripheral importance. It is only of late, however, when the Irani Zardushtis too have become more open with inquirers, that it has at last emerged that the central acts of Zoroastrian worship are doctrinally significant, and have probably done more than anything else - certainly more than any written text - to keep Zoroaster's own teachings alive for his followers down the ages. Moreover, as the nature and meaning of these acts of worship have become clearer, it has become possible (in my opinion) to trace a striking continuity in the devotional as well as the doctrinal system of the faith. This then provides solid evidence in support of Darmesteter's thesis that the doctrines set out in the Pahlavi books are in substance those of the Gathas; and this means that the beliefs common to the four religions of Toynbee's 'Syriac civilization' have demonstrably a clear chronological precedence in the Iranian faith.

Let us then consider very briefly what these beliefs and

practices were. It is generally accepted that a dominant characteristic of Zoroastrianism at all stages is that it is a religion of justice. Zoroaster preached that God is wholly just, as well as wholly wise and good; and he could not attribute to him any association, however remote, with the evil and suffering which so often seem unjustly to afflict the good in this life. So he preached a startlingly new, dualistic doctrine. He was convinced that he had received a revelation which showed that all justice, goodness, wisdom and truth stemmed from God; and all injustice, cruelty and wickedness from his adversary, the Hostile Spirit. Both Beings Zoroaster beheld as existing uncreated coeval but apart, in the beginning, when nothing else was. But God with his all-embracing wisdom, foresaw that if he and the Hostile Spirit could encounter, it would be possible in the end for good to overcome and destroy evil, and so make a universe that was wholly and purely good.

So, Zoroaster taught, God created this world as a battle-ground where their forces could meet. But first he created from his own divine essence seven lesser divinities, the 'Holy Immortals', to aid him in his task; and they in their turn brought other divine helpers into being - and it is this which, to the uninstructed or the prejudiced, gives Zoroastrianism the appearance of a polytheistic faith. Its lesser divinities are all, however, servants of the one God, their Creator, and share under him the common aim of strengthening good and combating evil. In the Gathas Zoroaster more than once refers to God as the

'father' of one of the Immortals; but this is a figurative image and the Zoroastrian priests, in their early encounters with Christians, insisted that it was they who were in fact the truer monotheists, because they adhered to Zoroaster's teaching that in the beginning God alone existed, the sole uncreated beneficient Being, whereas the Christians believed in the eternal co-existence of Father and Son.

With his divine helpers God then created this world in seven stages, perfect in every part. And these seven acts of creation, and the seven great divine beings who accomplished them, have been celebrated down the ages by the Zoroastrians through seven holy days of obligation, which provide the framework for their devotional year. According to their tradition (and I see no reason to doubt it) these holy days were established by Zoroaster himself, to inculcate his fundamental doctrines. Thereafter, as God in his omniscience had foreseen, the Hostile Spirit attacked the originally perfect world, in blind malignancy, inflicting physical and moral evil everywhere. Thus began the time of Mixture, in which we live now, and it is the duty of every man, having been made aware through God's revelation of the nature of things, to choose to fight on the side of good against evil in every walk of life, on the physical as well as the moral plane, in order to bring about the destruction of evil and the restoration of the original, wholly good state.

Zoroaster was thus the first prophet to preach both that creation has a purpose, and that the present state of things

will one day cease. This doctrine is common to the four faiths of the 'Syriac' civilization, but it was unknown in early Judaism, where the generations of men were thought to succeed one another endlessly - in the words of Job, 'They perish for ever without any regarding it' (Job IV. 20).

Zoroaster spoke not only of the ultimate end of this state of mixture, but also of the fate of the individual soul at death. Man, he taught, is the creature of God, and at death his soul will be judged by his Maker, according to what he has done to further God's cause on earth. All a dead man's good thoughts, words and acts will be placed on one side of the divine scales of justice, his evil ones on the other. If the good weigh more heavily, the soul ascends to Heaven, if the bad, it goes down to Hell; and for the very few whose stores of good and evil exactly counter-balance, there exists a third place, a grey limbo without joy or pain.

During this present time of mixture Heaven and Hell are to be experienced in spirit only. The pagan Iranians had earlier evolved a belief in a future for the soul in a heaven of all delights, but attainable only by the great and powerful; and in connection with this, it seems, they had reached a doctrine concerning the resurrection of the body, so that these delights could be experienced as fully in heaven as in this world. This resurrection (to judge from Indian parallels) was held to take place within a year after death. But for Zoroaster, matter could not be made pure and immortal again until the final defeat of

evil; and so he modified this doctrine into belief in what the Pahlavi books call 'the future body,' that is, a resurrection of the body at the end of time. At that great triumphant moment the earth will give up the dead, and all souls will be reunited with their resurrected bodies; and they, and those still living at that time, will together undergo the Last Judgment, which will finally separate the blessed from the damned. Then a great river of molten metal will flow over the earth. To the good the fiery flood will seem as pleasant as warm milk, but the wicked will perish in it, together with the Hostile Spirit and all the remaining forces of evil.

A last great religious rite will then be solemnized, by which immortality will be conferred on men in the flesh as well as in the spirit. And the kingdom of God will come again upon earth. Zoroaster emphasised throughout his teachings the goodness of this physical world in its pure original state; and it is here, and not in a remote heaven, that he looked for man's future happiness. This doctrine of the goodness of matter gives force to his teaching concerning the resurrection of the body, whereby man returns fully to the pristine state in which he was first created; and the seventh and last of the holy days of obligation is celebrated joyfully by Zoroastrians as a spring-time feast of the resurrection, and an annual reminder that evil will one day be defeated, and immortality conferred again on the world of good.

The salient feature of the whole group of Zoroaster's

eschatological doctrines is that they all derive essentially from the basic principle of God's justice. It is in Zoroastrianism, a religion which teaches the perfect, unwavering equity of God, unmodified by mercy or love, that the doctrines of the individual and last judgments have their full, majestic force; and there is no doubt that these doctrines, vividly apprehended, have had a major part in maintaining Zoroastrian morality at its high level down the centuries.

The Gathas themselves seem filled with a sense that the glorious restoration of the world would not be long delayed; yet in the end Zoroaster must have realised that he himself would not live to see that great climax; and he appears to have taught that it would be finally brought about with the help of one who would come after him, the Saoshyant or Saviour. In due course his followers evolved a belief that this Saviour would be born of Zoroaster's own seed, miraculously preserved in a lake. One day, when the end of time is near, a virgin will bathe in this lake and become with child, and will bear a son, the Saviour, who will lead the forces of good in their last stand against evil. A rich apocalyptic literature grew up around this belief, and this was probably especially cultivated in the 4th century B.C., when the conquest of Iran by Alexander the Great brought bloodshed and misery to the land, and turned men's thoughts more ardently than ever to hopes of the coming Saviour. The Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition is reflected in Greek literature and survives in the Pahlavi books.

By the time of Alexander's conquest, in 331 B.C., the Jews had been subject to the Persians for over 200 years, and had found theirs on the whole a light yoke. From the beginning they had indeed regarded the Persians as their benefactors, since it was Cyrus the Great who released them from captivity in Babylon. In II Isaiah Cyrus is even extolled as both a servant of Yahweh and an upholder (in true Zoroastrian fashion) of justice: 'I am Yahweh, I have called you (Cyrus) in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you ... Cyrus will bring forth justice to the nations ... He will not fail ... till he has established justice in the earth' (II Isaiah, 42.6.1). The Jews, whose prophet thus celebrated their deliverer, were a tiny, insignificant community in the sight of the Iranian King of kings, and at that epoch vast temporal power and authority lay with Zoroastrianism. But power and wealth and just dealings would hardly in themselves have sufficed to make the Jews susceptible to Zoroastrian influence, if the two faiths had not had much already in common - notably belief in one God, to be worshipped without images; and an ardent pursuit of righteousness, with the conviction that man would be rewarded or punished by God for his actions. The pre-exilic Jews looked for such rewards and punishments in this life, on which all their thoughts and endeavours were concentrated; and it seems that the Zoroastrian expectation of supra-mundane justice only gradually influenced their outlook, for it does not appear in Jewish literature until after Alexander's conquest. The Jews then became in due course subject first to

Alexander's heirs, the Seleucids, and then to the Romans, under whom they suffered persecution; and it seems to have been during those dark epochs that some of them embraced the hope that Zoroaster had held out, of finding in the afterlife a justice which seemed to fail upon this earth. When the Parthians established another Iranian empire to succeed the first Persian one, they gave what support they could to the Jews in their struggles against Hellenes and Romans; and it is in Jewish writings of the Parthian period that a whole coherent group of Zoroastrian doctrines appears. The hope of a national Messiah has become one of the world Saviour; and in place of Sheol, the shadowy underworld to which all alike must go at death, Heaven and Hell are proclaimed: 'And then shall the pit of torment appear, and over against it the place of refreshment. The furnace of Gehenna shall be made manifest, and over against it the Paradise of delight' (IV Ezra 7.36). There also occur the first clear references to the resurrection of the body, a belief rejected by the Sadducees, as unscriptural innovation, but adopted by the Pharisees, whose name is explained by some as that of the 'Persians' or 'Persianisers'. Despite opposition, this belief had become part of general Jewish expectation, it seems, by the time of the coming of Christ.

The Jews did not, however, adopt overtly the dualism which is at the heart of Zoroaster's teachings, and which was evidently too alien to their own concept of God to influence them consciously. Nevertheless, the development of the concept of Satan,

from being God's creature to being also his malignant, powerful adversary, 'who goeth about as a lion, seeking whom he may devour,' would seem to owe much to Zoroaster's concepts of the Hostile Spirit, while lacking its doctrinal clarity; for the Jews never abandoned their faith in the omnipotence of God, with all the perplexities which this necessarily brings.

Christianity appears to have acquired what one may now define as Zoroastrian doctrines mainly from Judaism, rather than directly; yet it seems that the verdict must stand of R.C. Zaehner, a Roman Catholic who spent much of his life studying Zoroastrianism. He concluded, writing a few years ago: 'Christianity claims to be the heir of the prophets of Israel. If there is any truth in this claim, it is no less heir to the Prophet of Iran, little though most Christians are aware of the fact.' It is to be hoped, therefore, that if students of Zoroastrianism can gradually find themselves more united, and better able to define the teachings of Zoroaster, so more scholars in a variety of disciplines will draw on this material as part of the heritage, in historical terms, of all three of Toynbee's 'Syriac' faiths.

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Note: xx indicates a work of fine scholarship, but heavy going
x indicates a work that is out of date, but still useful
? indicates a work that is idiosyncratic or unsound, but contains interesting or useful material


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